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Uzbekistan's Balancing Act: A Game of Chance for Independent External Policies

Vadim Romashov

In Uzbekistan, like in the other countries in the region, the uncertainty related to the current developments in Afghanistan as well as the declarations of the U.S. on reforming the military mission there have affected the geopolitical environment and aroused speculation regarding the transformation and relocation of the foreign military presence. Compounded by the increasing rivalry between the U.S. and Russia for regional influence, Uzbekistan's main goal is to retain maximum independence in its external policies. Tashkent holds its foreign partners at a distance with divergent regional strategies whilst simultaneously keeping all avenues open for additional security guarantees in order to ensure stability at its state borders.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan's external policy has been characterized by constant fluctuations in its relations with international actors who aim to project their political and economic power onto the region. Uzbek analysts traditionally share the view that the country pursues a "multi-vector" policy, referring to this as "foreign policy pragmatism" or "foreign relations diversification."¹ Outside experts often describe Uzbekistan's policy as one that "swings" between a close relationship with Moscow and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and cooperation with Washington and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such terms, notably "pendulum diplomacy" or "zigzag policy," have been applied repeatedly to describe frequent reorientations in the direction taken by Uzbekistani external policy.² However, labeling Uzbekistan's foreign policy in such ways

¹ For example, see Adhamdjon Yunusov, Yakov Umansky and D. Zainutdinova, "National Interests and Pragmatism in the Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan," in *Building a Common Future: Indian and Uzbek Perspectives on Security and Economic Issues*, ed. P. Stobdan, (Delhi: Hardev Printers, 1999), 20–36; Rafik Saifulin, "How Myths Are Born: A View from Tashkent on the CSTO and Central Asia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3 (July–September 2012).

² For examples of the use of the terms "swing," "pendulum," and "zigzag" see Jyotsna Bakhshi, "Russia and Uzbekistan Sign 'Treaty of Alliance Relations'," *Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses Comment*, December 27, 2005,

has several serious conceptual limitations. This chapter aims to address the limitations of the “pendulum perspective” on Uzbekistani policies and employs another approach, which allows a better understanding of the complex relations Tashkent has with its foreign partners.

From physics we know that a pendulum-like motion implies moving to one direction with a synchronous departure from another, opposite direction and to which it must ultimately return. Applying this logic to Tashkent’s diplomacy, policy must constantly swing back and forth between the two sides, but in fact the external strategy of Uzbekistan is far more complicated than this logic implies. It may include simultaneously moving in both, seemingly opposite, directions and, thus, contraposing and superimposing one strategy over another. Moreover, an idealized model of the “geopolitical pendulum” commonly places Uzbekistani diplomacy in-between the two positions characterized as pro-Russian and pro-U.S. directions. Such an approach based on the dualistic division of its policy orientation neglects the country’s important relations with China, Turkey, the European Union (EU), Iran, India, and other influential actors involved in the region’s politics.

A view of Tashkent’s foreign policy in the frame of the swinging pendulum, however, presupposes that there is a period of time available in which to calculate policy reorientation. Thus, we may identify a predictivist perspective here, a belief in the possibility to forecast foreign policy transformations with calculated certainty. This belief induces fallacious expectations of an inevitable, radical shift in Uzbekistani external strategy within a defined period.³ In this way, the importance of chance, changing circumstances and situational junctures in foreign and domestic affairs is downplayed. The ana-

http://www.idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/RussiaandUzbekistanSignTreatyofAllianceRelations_jbakshi_271205; Nathan Hamm, “Uzbekistan Exit from CSTO Reveals Limits of Russia’s Eurasian Integration Plans,” *E-International Relations*, July 17, 2012, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/17/uzbekistan-exit-from-csto-reveals-limits-of-russias-eurasian-integration-plans/>; Marlene Laruelle, “Factoring the Regional Impact of Uzbekistan’s Withdrawal from the CSTO,” *German Marshall Fund Policy Brief*, August 2012, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/factoring-regional-impact-uzbekistan%E2%80%99s-withdrawal-csto/>; Farkhod Tolipov, “Flexibility or Strategic Confusion? Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan,” *Uzbekistan Initiative Papers*, no. 2 (February 2014), <http://origin.library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1110347635144-152/UI+papers+ht2-Farkhad+Tolipov.pdf>.

³ For instance, Murat Laumulin, a Kazakh researcher, estimates that the “Uzbek pendulum” swings every two to three years. See Laumulin, “Virtual Security of Central Asia: The CSTO in the face of NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 3 (July–September 2012).

lytical idea of a pendulum-like external policy mechanism can also affect strategic decision-making in the countries that are engaged in Central Asian politics. As a final point, such an approach does not answer the critical questions of why the policy pendulum oscillates and what would constitute its “equilibrium position.”

Taking into consideration the limitations of the pendulum approach, this chapter presents an alternative view of Uzbekistan’s external policy as a “balancing act” that essentially refers to balancing feats performed by a tightrope walker rather than to the realist concept of “balance of power.” From this perspective, the rope that is stretched taut above the ground appears to be the path to a given destination defined by the long-term goals of the country’s government, acting as a “tightrope walker,” which aims to position Uzbekistan as an independent and strong leader of Central Asia. The strategic track towards independence and leadership is seen as an equilibrium position of Uzbekistani policy, while a tumble from the tightrope would mean the loss of the country’s advantageous position in the region. Therefore, the fluctuations of Tashkent’s foreign policy are not the swings of a pendulum but rather represent efforts to hold the strategic equilibrium. Similar to a tightrope walker, who by receiving inertia from many different directions holds onto the wire, Uzbekistan attempts to obtain political, military, and economic support from various international actors in order to secure its independence and leading position in the region. Obviously, the wider the amplitude is of the wire’s sway caused by circumstantial changes, the bigger the inclination of the ropewalker to that side that is able to provide better assistance in maintaining the balance.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the practices forming the pattern in Uzbekistan’s balancing act. I argue that the drastic changes in the external and internal security environment cause the Uzbekistani strategic “rope” to sway and, thus, force the country’s leadership to lean in different foreign policy directions. Importantly, for Uzbekistan the changes represent both a chance to achieve an advantage in regional politics as well as the risks associated with subsequent actions taken by foreign and domestic forces as a reaction to the fluctuations of the country’s policy. Such a game of chance and risk played by the Uzbekistani government introduces an element of political gamble to state policies. The goal of this game is to implement independence in a way that builds on an Uzbek tradition of power and historical past associated with the country’s previously central position in the region.

The revival of the past serves the present-day purpose of constructing a unified national identity in support of the state organization that has been formed under the long-lasting reign of President Islam Karimov.

Any examination of Uzbekistan's relations with Russia must take into account Moscow's indirect influence on strategic decision-making in Tashkent. Russia's policy practices tend to exert specific influence on the policy practices of Uzbekistan through various spheres of the interaction between the two states, which recently has been affected by conflictual relations between Tashkent and the CSTO, the modification of Russia's role in the security system of Uzbekistan, and the emergence of Eurasian economic initiatives within the region. By focusing on regional security influenced by Moscow-Tashkent relations, this chapter examines important internal-external dynamics in the formation and transformation of borders within and around Uzbekistan. It analyses official speeches, foreign and defense policy legislation, international agreements, and media and expert accounts. A broad range of sources is needed to alleviate the problem that characterizes research on Uzbekistan: limited access to a number of important Uzbekistani official documents, including the concepts of National Security and Foreign Policy Activity.

“Eternal Independence” and the Balancing Act

Independence Day is a widely celebrated holiday in Uzbekistan, to which Islam Karimov devotes his long and emotionally colored speeches. At the celebration of the twenty-second anniversary of Uzbekistan's independence in 2013, Karimov stated,

“[The] achievement of independence is precisely an opportunity to fulfill our great and sacred obligation, that is, to command our destinies and the fate of our country on our own, along with its natural, economic and intellectual resources... Independence means to be independent of anyone at any time, to secure sustainable growth rates of the economy, consistently boost the wellbeing of the popula-

tion, and bolster the standing and prestige of our country at the international arena, taking into account our national interests and long-term objectives.”⁴

The idea of the country’s “eternal independence” for which Uzbek “forefathers had strived for centuries” is a fundamental element of national ideology, and state policy practices have been designed accordingly.⁵ Foreign policy is aimed at positioning Uzbekistan as a regional leader, independent from external influence in its decision-making. The country’s aspirations to regional leadership are rooted in Central Asian history associated with the dominance of Uzbek tribal groupings in Transoxiana, the power of Uzbek khanates, and a special role assigned to the Uzbek SSR during Soviet rule. Neil Melvin observes that during the national delimitation process in 1924–1925 held by Moscow planners, Uzbekistan gained the pre-eminent historic centers of the region, including most of the territory of the three former khanates, and Tashkent became the main city of Central Asia, all of which contributed to the further development of a strong Uzbek identity.⁶

The balance between the extra-regional powers anchoring influence in the region, primarily Russia, the U.S. and China, appears to be the way in which Uzbekistan realizes its long-term goals. While China’s sources of influence are based mostly on economic power, Moscow and Washington are deeply involved in security cooperation with Tashkent.⁷ Proceeding from the view that Russia and the U.S. are geopolitical rivals in the region, Tashkent avoids crossing “the point of no return” in its relations with them. The Uzbekistani leadership strives to keep all directions open as options for receiving security guarantees in case the political conjuncture were to develop in a way that would force Uzbekistan to affiliate itself with one of the centers of power in order to eliminate immediate security threats and to bargain for better treatment from a powerful state or international organization. In the context of the strategic goal to maximize political independence, third-party se-

⁴ Islam Karimov, “Greeting Address at the Festive Event to Celebrate 22nd Anniversary of Uzbekistan’s Independence,” *Press Service of the President of Uzbekistan*, August 31, 2013, <http://www.press-service.uz/en/news/159/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Neil Melvin, *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road* (Florence, KY: Gordon & Breach Publishing, 2000), 91.

⁷ Unlike Uzbekistan’s 2004 Strategic Partnership Agreement with Russia and the 2002 Declaration on Strategic Partnership with the U.S., the 2012 Declaration on Strategic Partnership with China is less focused on security issues and instead concentrates on economic cooperation.

curity guarantees mean a promise by an outside power to provide concrete resources and assistance in eliminating security threats, rather than an assurance of direct military intervention to protect the state in situations of threat.

Since independence, the immediate policy objective of Uzbekistan has been to reduce Russian influence in Central Asia. However, the civil war in Tajikistan that erupted in 1992 between the central government and the United Tajik Opposition of Islamist and democratic forces, compelled Russia and Uzbekistan to maintain security cooperation. Apprehensive of the spread of Islamic radicalism to Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov backed the pro-Russian forces of Emomali Rakhmonov (Rakhmon), who became the president of Tajikistan in November 1994. In order to neutralize the risks of a possible expansion of the Tajik war and rapidly escalating tensions in Afghanistan, the Uzbekistani leadership actively supported the idea of creating a collective security system with Russia. In May 1992, in Tashkent, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST). As an additional security guarantee, in 1994 Russia and Uzbekistan concluded a military cooperation agreement, which involved among other issues the joint use of military facilities located on their territories. Thus, the shared interest of Russia and Uzbekistan in suppressing what was referred to as “Islamic extremism” provided the stimulus to preserve security ties between the two states.

In August 1998, the Taliban defeated the forces of Abdul Rashid Dostum, the warlord of a separatist movement in the northern, Uzbek-populated region of Afghanistan, and proceeded to approach the Uzbekistani border. These events prompted Tashkent to conclude that relying solely on military ties with Russia was not sufficient to ensure state security, and contacts with the U.S. and NATO were activated. In April 1999, Uzbekistan refused to renew its membership in the CST and, at the NATO summit in Washington, announced its decision to join GUAM, a bloc of pro-Western post-Soviet states formed by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. However, in summer 1999 the security situation along Uzbekistan’s borders deteriorated and slowed down any rapprochement with Western countries: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), created in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, attempted to infringe upon Uzbekistani territory by way of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Increased danger at the borders brought Tashkent to realize that by severing close security ties with Russia this unstable situation could take a turn for the worse. Hence, in 1999, Moscow and Tashkent signed an accord

on the further enhancement of comprehensive military and military-technical cooperation. In May 2001, the two states concluded a cooperation agreement on border issues that covered the joint fight against terrorism, illegal migration, arms and drug trafficking, and the mutual exchange of information, logistical support, officer training, etc. In addition, later in 2001 the two states signed an agreement on the joint use of air forces and air defense systems.⁸

A chance for Uzbekistan to abandon its security dependence on Russia occurred following the 9/11 events in 2001. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began anti-Taliban military operations in Afghanistan, and Tashkent offered its support to the U.S. However, President Karimov underlined that in order to provide assistance to the anti-terrorist campaign, Uzbekistan would need to have “guarantees of national security and territorial inviolability” and be able to “enhance the combat ability of the armed forces and the vigilance on borders.”⁹ In October 2001, Uzbekistan and the U.S. signed an agreement on the use of the Karshi-Khanabad airbase (K2) for military operations in Afghanistan and released a joint statement about consultations between both states in case of a threat occurring to Uzbekistan’s security and territorial integrity. Based on this cooperation, in March 2002 the two states signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation. In exchange for the use of the airbase, the U.S. increased the budgeted assistance to Uzbekistan, especially in relation to the objective of “peace and security enhancement.”¹⁰ According to Dmitry Gorenburg, military assistance from Washington included two armored river patrol boats, radios, upgrades for helicopters, navigations systems, facilities renovations, and support in training. During the period 2001–2005, the U.S. and Uzbekistan

⁸ Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii, “Soglashenie mezhdru Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Respublikoi Uzbekistan o sovместnom primenenii Voenno-vozdushnykh sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Voisk protivovozdushnoi oborony i Voenno-vozdushnykh sil Respubliki Uzbekistan v interesakh obespecheniia bezopasnosti vozdushnogo prostranstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Respubliki Uzbekistan,” *Biulleten' mezhdunarodnykh dogovorov*, no. 6 (June 23, 2005).

⁹ “Uzbekistan May Allow U.S. To Use Its Air Space for Humanitarian Flights,” *Interfax*, September 27, 2001 as cit. in “Turkmen Report,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 29, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347103.html>.

¹⁰ See Jim Nichol, “Uzbekistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests,” *Congressional Research Service, CRS Report*, August 21, 2013, 24–25, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21238.pdf>.

had a broad-scale military cooperation program, and Uzbekistani forces participated in a number of NATO-led military exercises.¹¹

In 2001, whilst trying to keep its foreign policy balanced, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Nevertheless, its external policy remained largely one-sided until the SCO summit of June 2004, held in Tashkent, when Uzbekistan made new attempts to balance its policy. The SCO adopted a decision to establish a Regional Antiterrorism Structure with headquarters in the capital city of Uzbekistan, and Islam Karimov signed a Strategic Partnership Treaty with Russia, which provided for close cooperation in creating “an enduring and effective system of regional security in Central Asia.”¹² The parties agreed to form consultative mechanisms through relevant ministries and agencies to fight terrorism. Once again, the terrorist threat was on the agenda: in spring 2004, reportedly, the Islamic Jihad Union, a splinter group of the IMU, perpetrated a series of bomb attacks in Uzbekistan.¹³

In May 2005, the Andijon events suddenly swung Uzbekistan’s strategic path towards an independent policy. Western governments attacked Islam Karimov over the cruel suppression of riots and repeatedly called for an international investigation into the incident; this was rejected by the president on the grounds that it would violate state sovereignty.¹⁴ The U.S. and EU restricted aid and arms exports to Uzbekistan as well as visas for Uzbek officials, and their assets were frozen. Tashkent turned to Russia and China for support. On a visit to Moscow in June 2005, Karimov accused Western countries of backing “extremist and radical forces” in Andijon,¹⁵ and shortly after Uzbekistan left GUAM. At an SCO meeting in July 2005, the president

¹¹ Dmitry Gorenburg, “External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Working Paper*, January 2014, 52, 56, <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/afghanistan/central-asia-security/publications/SIPRI-OSFno1WP.pdf>.

¹² The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Dogovor o strategicheskoy partnerstve mezhdru Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Respublikoi Uzbekistan,” 2004, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/spd_md.nsf/0/04545C3F32532D6DC3257DB9004735F1 (translation by Vadim Romashov).

¹³ Jim Nichol, “Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests,” *Congressional Research Service, CRS Report*, June 6, 2006, 8, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/68821.pdf>.

¹⁴ Nichol, “Uzbekistan,” 16–17.

¹⁵ President of Russia, “Beginning of a Meeting with Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov,” June 28, 2005, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/06/28/1824_type82914_90517.shtml.

of Uzbekistan joined in the declaration of the organization that called for the parties of the anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan to “set a deadline for the temporary use of... infrastructure facilities of the SCO member states and for their military presence in these countries.”¹⁶ Thereupon, Tashkent demanded that the U.S. withdraw all military units from the base in Karshi-Khanabad within six months, and in November 2005 the base was closed.

Under these changed circumstances, Tashkent needed to demonstrate to the Western states that the country could not be isolated within its borders from the rest of the world, and that it had other strategic partners that could help to ensure national security. In November 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty of Alliance, which stipulates that

“If an act of aggression is committed against one of the sides by any state or group of states, this will be viewed as an act of aggression against both sides.... the other side... will provide necessary assistance, including military assistance, as well as giving aid through other means at its disposal.”¹⁷

The Treaty called for consultations in the event of a security threat to either country and emphasized that the states were to pursue the enhancement of stability and security at global and regional levels.¹⁸ Furthermore, in January 2006 Uzbekistan joined the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and, in May of that year, Karimov announced the country’s accession to the CSTO. The accelerated deepening of Russian-Uzbekistani military-political cooperation must be seen as an attempt by the government in Tashkent to receive inertia from the Russian side in order to keep its balance on the oscillating “strategic wire.” The aim of the Uzbek policy-makers was to induce a change in the attitude of Western states so that they would recognize Uzbekistan as an independent regional power.

Contacts between Uzbek and U.S. officials resumed by 2007, and at the end of 2008 Western countries started to soften sanctions on the Uzbekistani government. In turn, U.S. military personnel received permission to transit through the Termez airbase near the Afghan border (leased to Germany) and to use the Navoi airport for transportation of non-lethal goods to Afghanistan. In 2009, Washington restarted military cooperation with Uzbekistan in

¹⁶ Cit. as in Nichol, “Central Asia,” 15.

¹⁷ Cit. as in Bakhshi, “Russia and Uzbekistan.”

¹⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Dogovor o soiuznicheskikh otnosheniakh mezhdu Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Respublikoi Uzbekistan,” 2005, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/spd_md.nsf/0/72EF98B3AEF0CDC9C3257DB90047370E.

the field of military education and training, and initiated Annual inter-governmental Bilateral Consultations (ABC), which have significantly improved security cooperation and boosted high-level official contacts between the two states.¹⁹ Uzbekistan assumed a central role in the Northern Distribution Network for non-lethal military supplies to Afghanistan. In parallel with the restoration of Uzbekistan's relations with Western states, and as a part of the balancing act, its cooperation with Russia was curtailed. In November 2008, the country's officials announced the suspension of their participation in the EurAsEC. However, Uzbekistan's formal commitments within CSTO were still hindering the reinforcement of a pro-Western direction, which at that time was seen in Tashkent as a way to achieve a position of regional leadership and independence from Moscow. Therefore, the Uzbekistani policy of balancing acts required further steps to expand the space for independent external relations.

The Policy toward Multilateral Cooperation and Russia's Response

The strategic goal of Uzbekistan to achieve "eternal independence" is manifest in policy practices aimed to distance the state from multilateral formats of any deeper international integration. In 2011, Islam Karimov stated,

"When it comes to the formation of various inter-state associations, it is possible that they will go beyond economic interests and gain political color and content, which in turn may adversely affect the already established contacts and cooperation of the members of the association with other external partners, the development of integration processes with third-party countries."²⁰

Following this guideline, Uzbekistan assumed nominal participation in the CSTO yet left aside any substantive engagement with the organization. Uzbekistan did not take part in the CSTO military exercises, it opposed the creation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, and finally, on June 28,

¹⁹ See Nichol, "Uzbekistan," 18–20; and Gorenburg, "Central Asian Military and Security Forces," 62.

²⁰ Islam Karimov, "Doklad na torzhestvennom sobranii, posviashchennom 19-letiiu Konstitutsii Respubliki Uzbekistan," *Press Service of the President of Uzbekistan*, December 7, 2011, <http://www.press-service.uz/ru/news/4913/> (translation by Vadim Romashov).

2012, the CSTO Secretariat received the official note from Uzbekistani authorities regarding their decision to suspend participation in the organization. It is not accidental that Tashkent sent the official note two weeks after the Uzbek and Russian presidents signed a Declaration on the Further Consolidation of Strategic Partnership and a Memorandum of Understanding on Measures for Uzbekistan's Accession to the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Free Trade Zone Agreement. The signature of the documents and the decision to suspend its participation in the CSTO testify to the intention of the Uzbekistani government to switch to bilateral relations with Russia and to participate only in those inter-state integration associations that do not imply close political engagement but do bring economic benefits.

However, an unidentified "source from Uzbekistani Foreign Ministry" explained this decision to the Russian media by referring to Tashkent's disagreement with the CSTO's strategic plans towards Afghanistan, which imply a joint approach to relations with that country.²¹ Islam Karimov repeatedly underlined the irreplaceable nature of bilateral relations with Kabul. At the September 2014 SCO summit he stressed that "Uzbekistan builds and will continue to build steady and friendly relations with Afghanistan deriving from the national interests of both countries and exclusively on [a] bilateral basis."²² A bilateral relationship with Afghanistan, as opposed to a unified policy within an inter-state alliance, widens Tashkent's maneuvering room for cooperation with different foreign partners.

The decision by Uzbekistan to suspend participation in the CSTO triggered guesswork in the Russian media and the expert community on the real motives behind this policy action. Most accounts immediately speculated that Tashkent had bargained for certain security guarantees from Washington. Increased political contacts between Uzbek and American officials were presented in support of this conjecture.²³ Some experts assumed that Tashkent and Washington were discussing the possibility of the resumption of a U.S. military presence in the country in exchange for excess military equipment from Afghanistan, including the return of the military base to Karshi-Khanabad or, alternatively, the substitution of German troops in Termez by

²¹ Gennadii Sysoev, Elena Chernenko, and Maksim Iusin, "Uzbekistan otryvaetsia ot kolektivnoi," *Kommersant*, June 29, 2012, 6.

²² Islam Karimov, "Speech at the SCO Summit," *Press Service of the President of Uzbekistan*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.press-service.uz/en/news/5005/>.

²³ "Uzbekistan poluchit garantii bezopasnosti ot SShA, schitaiut eksperty," *RIA*, June 29, 2012, <http://ria.ru/world/20120629/687946170.html>.

U.S. forces.²⁴ At the same time, Uzbekistan was portrayed as a troublesome member of the CSTO, an “enfant terrible,” as a Kazakh analyst had it, meaning that it had been problematic for the CSTO participants to conduct constructive dialogue with Tashkent regarding the deepening of security integration and enhancement of the organization’s functionality and efficiency.²⁵ The General Secretary of CSTO, Nikolai Bordiuzha, reasoned that Uzbekistan’s decision had arisen from the country’s divergent views on the formation of a system of collective security, which had led to difficulties of cooperation within the organization itself. At the same time, the “Gen Sec” admitted that it would be challenging to build “the most effective” system of collective security in Central Asia without Uzbekistan, and he added that Tashkent would not be able to form its national security goals without the participation of the CSTO members.²⁶

In order to decrease oscillations caused by the growing speculative enthusiasm of the Russian media and the expert community, as well as the annoyance of the political elite in Moscow, at the end of August 2012 the Senate (the upper chamber of Uzbekistan’s Parliament) adopted a Concept of Foreign Policy Activity. The Concept proclaims that Uzbekistan is free to join any inter-state organization but reserves the right to withdraw in case that organization becomes a military-political bloc. This principle was already enshrined in the 1992 Law on Defense and in the 1996 Law on Main Principles of Foreign Policy Activity. The 2012 Foreign Policy Concept replaced the 1996 Law on Foreign Policy Main Principles and made significant amendments to the 1995 Military Doctrine, which ruled out any participation of Uzbekistani forces in international peacekeeping operations. Presenting the concept to the Senate, Abdulaziz Kamilov, Foreign Minister of Uzbeki-

²⁴ Sysoev, Chernenko and Iusin, “Uzbekistan”; “Eksperty: Demarsh Uzbekistana v otnoshenii ODKB podstegnet pohoziye tendentsii v Kirgizii i Tadjikistane,” *Regnum*, June 29, 2012, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1546578.html>; Kirill Belianinov and Elena Chernenko, “Tsentral’nuii Aziyu razdelili po bazovomu priznaku,” *Kommersant*, August 23, 2012, 6.

²⁵ Laumulin, “Virtual Security of Central Asia”; Aleksandr Shustov, “ODKB bez Uzbekistana,” *Strategic Culture Foundation*, July 6, 2012, <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2012/07/06/odkb-bez-uzbekistana-15357.html>.

²⁶ Nikolai Bordiuzha in interview with *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 21, 2012, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/event/Intervyu-generalnogo-sekretarya-ODKB-Nikolaya-Bordiyuzhi-agentstvu-RIA-Novosti-gazete-Moskovskie-novo>.

stan, stressed that “the Uzbek soldiers would never fight in foreign countries.”²⁷

The main provision of the Concept, which aims to reassure Moscow of Tashkent’s reliability as a strategic partner and an ally of Russia, states that Uzbekistan does not allow the deployment of foreign military bases and facilities on its territory. However, there are many nuances in the document that allude to the continuing balancing act. The real engagement of Uzbekistan with the principle of the non-deployment of foreign military on its territory is questionable, as the adoption of the Concept did not affect the German airbase in Termez. Moreover, the document does not ban access to the country’s military facilities and, in fact, Uzbekistan may allow other foreign troops to use its own infrastructure.

By adopting the Concept, Tashkent aimed to demonstrate that it does not intend to engage closely in terms of military and political cooperation with NATO and the U.S., and neither with the CSTO and Russia. Additionally, the document casts a shadow on Uzbekistan’s commitments under the Treaty of Alliance with Russia. In particular, the commitment to mutual support in case of aggression against one of the parties is called into question. One of its important components, military assistance, is limited by the Concept’s provision of non-participation of Uzbekistani soldiers in operations abroad. However, Uzbekistan has not declared neutrality and has thus left room for political maneuvering with its international partners. To emphasize the independence of Uzbekistan from foreign actors, the Concept states that “no integration should be imposed from the outside” and “problems in Central Asia should be solved by the states in the region without interference from external forces.”²⁸

Thus, the adoption of the foreign policy concept closed the door that had previously been left ajar following the notification of suspension of participation in the CSTO. The member states of the security organization decided not to accept the conduct of their “enfant terrible” and locked the door shut. Instead of upholding Tashkent’s wish to suspend its participation only, the

²⁷ “Senat Uzbekistana zapretil chlenstvo strany v voennykh blokakh i razmeshchenie na ee territorii voennykh baz,” *Vestnik Kavkaza*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.vestikavkaza.ru/news/Senat-Uzbekistana-zapretil-chlenstvo-strany-voennykh-blokakh-i-razmeshchenie-na-eye-territorii-voe.html>.

²⁸ D. Azizov, “Senat Uzbekistana odobril zakon o kontseptsii vneshnepoliticheskoi deiatel’nosti,” *Trend.az*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.trend.az/print/2060201.html> (translation by Vadim Romashov).

Council of Collective Security adopted a decision at the CSTO summit on December 19, 2012 to suspend Uzbekistan's membership entirely. In this way the member states deprived Tashkent of the right to use the capacity of the system of collective security in case of security crises and to participate in the organization's decision-making process. The Council laid down a key condition for Uzbekistan's possible return: Tashkent would have to sign and ratify all the international agreements and decisions adopted under the CSTO.²⁹

The transformations of Uzbekistan's foreign policy in 2012 signal the country's return to the strategic path toward an independent policy of being a regional leader and, through this, a pivotal actor in Central Asia. The immediate motivation for the decision to leave the CSTO was the maximization of gains from relations with Western countries, who had announced the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan and expressed an intention to gift surplus military equipment to Central Asian countries. Therefore, Tashkent has striven to demonstrate that NATO and the U.S. remain better security providers for the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan than are the CSTO and Russia, and has inclined towards negotiating security guarantees primarily with Washington. However, in this situation Uzbekistan risks undermining its strategic relations with Russia and departing from its policy of balancing act.

Threats to National Security and Regional Stability

Along with a chance for gaining the advantage in regional politics sought by the Uzbekistani leadership, the reorganization of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan brings with it risks for national security. Tashkent often draws attention to its anxiety that the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan will result in deterioration of the security environment along Uzbekistan's borders. At the SCO summit in September 2014, Islam Karimov warned,

²⁹ Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Ob itogakh sessii Soveta kolektivnoi bezopasnosti ODKB," December 19, 2012, http://www.odkb-csto.org/news/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=1536&SECTION_ID=91.

“[T]he withdrawal of international security assistance forces from Afghanistan can lead to mounting threats and growing instability, expanding terrorist and extremist activities as well as increasing scales of drug trafficking not merely in the wider Central Asian region, but also far beyond its rims... [A]ny vacuum emergent in Afghanistan can within a short period of time be filled by various destructive and terrorist groups.”³⁰

However, Uzbekistan is not overly concerned about its own 137-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan, the shortest Afghan border amongst the Central Asian states. The frontier is well secured by the Uzbekistani military with heavy arms and a border barrier with two barbed wire lines (one of which is electrified) and landmines, which was erected by Tashkent after the Taliban victories in Afghanistan. The presence of the German airbase in Termez and a natural barrier, the Amu Darya River that separates the two states, also contribute to border protection. The only bridge across the river can be closed at any time if danger arises from the southern neighbor, just as was the case in the period of 1996–2002. Simultaneously, the heavy security at the border is not conducive to building relationships of trust between local people and authorities on the two banks of the Amu Darya. The Uzbek population is numerically prevalent in the northern districts of Afghanistan, but the cross-border flows of people are substantially restricted. Moreover, Uzbekistani authorities commonly present the frequent border incidents that result in civilian deaths as terrorist attacks and infiltration.³¹

The state border with Afghanistan is not the only border to create concern for the Uzbekistani government. In the Central Asian context, the words “Afghan border” do not mean merely any particular country’s national border with Afghanistan but also carry the connotation of the former Soviet Afghan border. The general expectation is that the security threat emerging after the military withdrawal of ISAF may reach the territory of every single Central Asian republic. Uzbekistan’s geographic location in the middle of Central Asia with its apparent strategic and economic advantages also creates specific security challenges for Tashkent. In light of this threat, the Uzbekistani government considers its frontiers with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as its “secondary Afghan borders.” According to Christian Bleuer and Said Reza

³⁰ Islam Karimov, “Speech at the SCO Summit.”

³¹ For an example of this type of presentation, see “Grazhdane Afganistana napali na pogrannariad Uzbekistana, imeiutsia zhertvy,” *12news.uz*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.12news.uz/news/2013/03/grazhdane-afganistana-napali-na-pogra/#more-19254>.

Kazemi, such a perception, coupled with the belief that its neighbors are not able to prevent incursions of “militants and terrorists” through their territory and into Uzbekistan, reinforces the conviction of the necessity to maintain heavy security measures at the Tajik and Kyrgyz borders.³² In effect this increases distrust (high as it is already) between Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks, and adds to the instability at their joint borders; and the conflict-ridden relations between these neighboring states play into the hands of those termed “extremists.”

In the recent past, the main territorial target for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has been the Ferghana Valley, which is situated in the immediate vicinity of Tashkent, the center of Uzbek power. The instability at the cross-roads of the three countries of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can undermine security and the political situation in the entire Central Asian region. Besides this region with its troublesome reputation, there is a threat that a new channel for the infiltration of insurgents into Uzbekistan’s territory might occur through the Afghan-Turkmen border. Since 2013, the Taliban and its allies have intensified their activity in Afghan provinces adjacent to Turkmenistan. Some areas were temporally taken in the province of Faryab, and in Badghis province a group of gunmen stormed the border checkpoint.³³ In February and May 2014, militants from these two provinces, reportedly of Turkmen and Uzbek ethnic origin, crossed the border and attacked Turkmenistan’s border guards.³⁴ In comparison with the Afghan borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the Afghan-Turkmen border is poorly defended. Tashkent pays considerably less attention to the border with Turkmenistan than it does to its turbulent frontiers with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As a consequence, the IMU and other insurgent groups could be in a position to use the Afghanistan–Turkmenistan channel to intrude into Uzbekistan’s territory.

Related to these developments, the crisis in Ukraine that began in late 2013 also poses a threat to Tashkent’s authority. The domestic opposition

³² Christian Bleuer and Said Reza Kazemi, “Between co-operation and insulation: Afghanistan’s relations with the Central Asian republics,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network Thematic Report*, January 2014, 43–44, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140608-Bleuer_Kazemi-Central_Asia.pdf.

³³ “V afganskoi provintsii Badgis unichtozhen zamestitel’ lidera Talibana,” *Voennyi Obozrevatel*, October 28, 2013, <http://waronline.info/afghanistan/v-afganskoy-provintsii-badgis-unichtozhen-zamestitel-lidera-talibana.html>.

³⁴ Bruce Pannier and Muhammad Tahir, “More Turkmen Troops Killed along Afghan Border,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-turkmen-troops-killed-afghan-border/25400833.html>.

and external actors have received a stimulus for their actions taken in response to Uzbekistan's policy practices. In spring 2014, along with the developments in Crimea, the activity of a little-known movement "Alga Karakalpakstan" fighting for the independence of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic in Uzbekistan, suddenly increased. The Alga Karakalpakstan activists held several protests urging the exercising the republic's constitutional right to organize a referendum on secession from Uzbekistan. The activists called for Moscow to support their aspirations and even to admit Karakalpakstan to the Russian Federation in spite of the absence of common border. The pro-Karakalpakstan activists made similar requests to neighboring Kazakhstan on the basis of the argument that it is the Kazakh language which is closest to Karakalpak. Such appeals have been backed by references to the history of Karakalpakia.³⁵ The leaders of Alga Karakalpakstan emphasize that accession to Russia or Kazakhstan is not a goal in itself but instead a possible way "to protect the sovereignty and the future development" of Karakalpakstan.³⁶ Even though the strength and viability of this movement remains unknown, the Karakalpak precedent may trigger centrifugal tendencies also in Bukhara and Samarkand, Uzbekistan's cities with large Tajik populations and historically significant for Tajik identity. Furthermore, Karakalpakstan is the site of the "Jaslyk" prison, which houses many inmates allegedly jailed for crimes related to outlawed Islamic organizations, mainly from Hizb ut-Tahrir but also from the IMU. Although the Islamic radicals in the Karakalpak opposition for the time being form only a small group numbering around 50 people based mostly in Kazakhstan and partly in Karakalpakstan,³⁷ the prison might represent a particular interest for radical Islamists to "liberate" their associates. There is no reliable information on links with terrorist groups from Afghanistan, but members of the IMU and other Islamist radical organizations may attempt to infiltrate Karakalpakstan through Turkmenistan in order to manipulate potential separatist aspirations,

³⁵ According to the 1873 Guendeman Peace Treaty, Karakalpakstan was ceded to the Russian Empire by the Khanate of Khiva. From 1924 to 1930, it was a part of the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic and an entity within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic from 1930 until 1936, when it was transferred to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

³⁶ Marip Kungradskii, "Nastalo vremia ob'ediniat'sia i deistvovat," *Shiraq*, May 21, 2014, <http://shiraqnews.com/news/marip-kungradskij-nastalo-vremya-ob/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

destabilize the situation, and undermine the authority of the government in Tashkent.

The Ukrainian developments in 2013–2014 have also inspired Uzbekistan's political opposition, in particular the People's Movement of Uzbekistan (PMU), which in February 2014 called for the use of arms to unseat President Karimov.³⁸ The leader of the Movement, Muhammad Salih, resides in Turkey, and, as his representatives do not fail to mention, Karimov is concerned about the possibility that Istanbul could provide political and financial support to the PMU.³⁹ Such concerns were linked with the country's presidential election in 2015, in which Karimov was re-elected despite rumors that the aging incumbent would not participate in the election and was searching for possible successors.⁴⁰ However, as experts note, the moment of power transition from 77-year-old Islam Karimov is inevitably approaching and this heightens internal risks notwithstanding his re-election to the presidential office.⁴¹

In order to ensure stability inside the country and at its borders, Tashkent expects security guarantees primarily from Washington because, amongst other issues, these guarantees may involve the delivery of military hardware from Afghanistan through the Excess Defense Articles program. Uzbekistan's military equipment is mostly of Soviet origin and, unlike in Kazakhstan, it has not undergone extensive modernization.⁴² Despite the fact that the Uzbekistani army appears quite capable of suppressing opposition unrest and of fighting against small groups of Islamist insurgents, the condition of its hardware is unworthy of a country that purports to be a regional leader. From this point of view, Tashkent seeks high military capability for the improvement of its political position in the negotiations over water issues and border conflicts with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the strengthening of its position

³⁸ Usman Haknazarov, "Islam Karimov reshil pozhiznenno ostat'sia u vlasti," *Narodnoe Dvizhenie Uzbekistana*, February 3, 2014, <http://uzxalqharakati.com/ru/archives/6624>.

³⁹ Usman Haknazarov, "Prezident Karimov gotov poiti na poklon dazhe k osnovnomu vragu – Emomali Rakhmonu," *Ozodagon*, July 23, 2014, <http://catoday.org/centrasia/15325-usman-haknazarov-prezident-karimov-gotov-poyti-na-poklon-dazhe-k-osnovnomu-vragu-emomali-rahmonu.html>.

⁴⁰ For the pre-election situation in Uzbekistan, see Alexey Malashenko, "Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential Political Transition," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, July 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Uzbekistan_web_Eng2014.pdf.

⁴¹ See Evgeny Minchenko et al., "Assessment of political risks for foreign investors in Central Asian countries: comparative analysis," *Minchenko Consulting Report*, February 2015, 5, http://www.minchenko.ru/netcat_files/File/Political_risks_CA_2014.pdf.

⁴² See Gorenburg, "Central Asian Military and Security Forces."

in relation to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan's main regional competitor. Therefore, receiving even second-hand NATO equipment is a better option for Tashkent than the continued use of obsolete Soviet arms, the maintenance of which contributes to preserve Uzbekistan's dependence on Russia's technical service and supply of components.

In 2012, Moscow decided to provide unprecedented direct military-technical aid to Kyrgyzstan worth \$1.1 billion as well as \$200 million for the Tajik army, including aviation, armored vehicles, artillery, air defense weapons and small arms.⁴³ This decision points to Russia's response to the increased military cooperation between Washington and Tashkent and an attempt to restrain Uzbekistan's conduct toward its neighbors. The increasing dependence of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on Russian military supplies substantially reduces U.S. influence in these countries, and the simultaneous prolongation of the lease contracts for Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (for twenty and for thirty years, respectively) further consolidates Russian presence in the region. In autumn 2012, Moscow also made an effort to outbid the U.S. for a possible military deal with Uzbekistan and signed a bilateral program with Tashkent on arms supplies until 2020. At the time of writing, details on the implementation of this program remain unavailable.

Despite these Russian actions, Uzbekistan and the U.S. have continued to intensify their military cooperation. In March 2013, NATO redeployed its Central Asian Liaison office from Astana to Tashkent. Although the organization's representatives asserted that the redeployment is part of a regular regional rotation process, it raised a new wave of speculations about the future development of the office into a military structure.⁴⁴ No matter what the real motive is for this, the move indicates that NATO is not going to leave the region. In May 2014, following the official opening of the office, James Appathurai, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, stated that "curtailing of combat units in neighboring Afghanistan does not mean the end of cooperation with the countries of the region" and added that "just a small change in the mission will hap-

⁴³ Ivan Safronov, Sergei Strokan', and Elena Chernenko, "Kirgiziiu i Tadjikistan vooruzhat rossiiskimi den'gami," *Kommersant*, November 6, 2012, 1; Ivan Safronov and Elena Chernenko, "Rossiia vooruzhit Kirgiziiu i Tadjikistan," *Kommersant*, October 2, 2013, 8.

⁴⁴ Joshua Kucera, "NATO to Open Liaison Office in Uzbekistan," *Eurasianet.org*, May 26, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67021/>.

pen.” Appathurai promised assistance to Uzbekistan in its military reforms, which include the modernization of military institutions, defense structures, and military training.⁴⁵

The trend of increased military cooperation between the U.S. and Uzbekistan has cemented the conviction in Russian expert opinion that Washington plans to reset its military presence in Uzbekistan.⁴⁶ However, the transfer of Western excess military equipment to Uzbekistan is still unspecified, and Tashkent continues to maintain its military cooperation with Russia. In December 2014 at a meeting with President Vladimir Putin, Islam Karimov underscored that Tashkent “supports a systematic and active expansion of contacts in this strategically important area for full and effective implementation of the adopted long-term intergovernmental agreements and programs.” He explained this position due to “serious security threats, unpredictable situation in Afghanistan after the upcoming withdrawal of ISAF peacekeeping forces, the increasing scale of terrorism and drug trafficking, and [...] creeping expansion of militant extremism and religious radicalism.”⁴⁷

The intentions of the U.S. and Russia to enhance military cooperation with Uzbekistan reveal that Uzbekistan remains their important strategic partner in Central Asia. However, the future format of the rival powers’ military presence in Uzbekistan depends on Tashkent’s decision on how to counter the threats to its national security and the attacks on its authority within the state. These risks are concomitant to the gamble for wider political independence, which Uzbekistan actively engages in by balancing between the extra-regional powers whilst the international military presence in Afghanistan is undergoing reorganization.

⁴⁵ James Appathurai in an interview with *Podrobno*, May 17, 2014, http://podrobno.uz/cat/politic/otkr-buro-nato-v-tash/?sphrase_id=21108 (translation by Vadim Romashov).

⁴⁶ For example, see Viktoriia Panfilova, “SShA ishchut zamenu Manasu,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 23, 2014, 7.

⁴⁷ President of Russia, “Nachalo rossiisko-uzbekistanskikh peregovorov v rasshirennom sostave,” October 10, 2014, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/47215> (translation by Vadim Romashov).

“Triumvirate” Politics and the Eurasian Detour Around Uzbekistan

Russia's attempts to involve Uzbekistan in the Eurasian integration projects following the rupture of Tashkent's relations with Western states after the 2005 Andijon events have not succeeded. The choice of the Uzbekistani government to favor bilateral relations instead of multilateral formats of cooperation is not ultimately to Moscow's liking because of the low engagement it achieves in integration initiatives. Moreover, Uzbekistan continues its traditional policy towards the neighboring states, above all in regard to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, from the position of strength, which takes full advantage of its central location in the region. In disputes with its neighbors, Tashkent from time to time employs energy and transport blockades as policy instruments in order to demonstrate its dominant position. Nevertheless, if the security situation requires support from the Russian side, or if there is a need to balance policies, Uzbekistan is willing to normalize relations with Moscow's Central Asian allies. This foreign policy conduct is not merely a manifestation of Uzbekistan's balancing act; it also stems from its identity as a regional leader. Against the background of Uzbekistan's history, it is even possible to argue that the attitudes to its neighbors, which change from exerting pressure to expressing benevolence, reflect something of the practices of the khans' relations with their vassals.

However, the Uzbekistani leadership has a different attitude to Kazakhstan and sees it as a strong state that can be an equal partner. Taking into account this view of Tashkent, Russian and Kazakh experts promote the idea of a “triumvirate,” in other words the trilateral cooperation of Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Trilateral cooperation would grant a “privileged” status to Uzbekistan as a regional leader on a par with Russia and Kazakhstan. The “triumvirate” is supposed to be based on Russia's comprehensive bilateral relations with the two regional leaders as well as the strategic bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and complemented by cooperation in the frame of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁴⁸ In June 2013, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took the first political step in this direction by signing an agreement on strategic partnership that brings closer Kazakhstani-

⁴⁸ See Viktoriia Panfilova, “Triumvirat evraziiskikh soiuznikov,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 11, 2013, 6.

Uzbekistani and Russian-Uzbekistani cooperation. At a December 2014 meeting of Putin and Karimov, it was announced that the parties discussed the possibility of signing an agreement on a free trade zone between the EEU and Uzbekistan.⁴⁹

Alexander Knyazev, a Russian expert on Central Asia, believes that the scheme of trilateral cooperation will contribute to regional security as a common strategy of the three major states in addressing threats, primarily those related to the developments in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ However, the intensified Uzbekistani-U.S. military-political dialogue does not strengthen confident relations between Moscow and Tashkent, which are necessary for the creation of a sustained trilateral structure of security cooperation. Therefore, the Russian government is developing an alternative approach in its relationship with Uzbekistan, an approach that potentially brings considerable risks for Tashkent's leadership aspirations in the region. It implies setting up a detour around Uzbekistan in order to substantially decrease the dependence of Russia and its allies on this country as the main transit territory and energy supplier.

Uzbekistan is the sole gas exporter to Tajikistan and the south of Kyrgyzstan, and this arrangement provides Tashkent with powerful leverage that backs its position in territorial and water disputes with the neighboring states. Tajikistan has not received gas from Uzbekistan since late 2012. In April 2014, the Uzbekistani gas transit company UzTransGaz cut off supplies to Kyrgyzstan. In addition to the political motives to apply pressure to the Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani governments, there are economic reasons for suspending supplies. A variety of problems related to the exploration and development of gas fields as well as growing domestic demand limit the export potential of Uzbekistan. Moreover, part of the resources are consumed for developing the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline system. In order to secure a share in the strategically important and profitable Chinese energy market, Uzbekistan has to provide the pipeline with gas almost at maximum capacity and at the expense of traditional customers.

Tashkent's position in regional energy politics has left Moscow with both the opportunities and the need to organize gas deliveries to southern

⁴⁹ President of Russia, "Press statement following Russian-Uzbekistani talks," December 10, 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23373>.

⁵⁰ Alexander Knyazev, "Slozhitsia li os' bezopasnosti Astana-Tashkent-Moskva?," *Zonakz*, June 14, 2013, <http://zonakz.net/articles/69429>.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Gazprom has allocated 65 billion rubles to construct the gas pipeline connecting the north and south of Kyrgyzstan by the year 2016. In order to provide the Osh region, which is completely deprived of gas, with alternative energy sources before this date, the gas company has earmarked 20 billion rubles as a soft loan to the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of Energy.⁵¹ In December 2014, the president of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Atambaev, announced that there is also an agreement with Gazprom on the construction of a gas pipeline from a gas field in Batken province to the Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces.⁵² In order to substitute gas imports in Tajikistan, the company plans to start gas production at the Sarykamysh field near Dushanbe and to exploit resources from the Western Shaambary field.⁵³ Moreover, the fourth line of the aforementioned gas pipeline to China is planned to run via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which would allow both Central Asian countries to purchase Turkmen resources directly from the pipe. Eventually, Tashkent may lose the “gas cudgel” that it traditionally has employed toward Dushanbe and Bishkek.

Tashkent plays an important role also in the regional electricity distribution network due to the fact that most of the transmission facilities of the Central Asian Power System (CAPS), including its dispatch center and personnel, are placed in Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, the CAPS was a key mechanism that united Central Asian republics within an integrated system of redistribution of water and energy. When relations became market-based following the dissolution of the USSR, Tashkent gained additional leverage with its neighbor states. The parties are frequently unable to finalize contracts on electricity transit and, as a result, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan suffer from energy shortages in winter. Kazakhstan is in a better position because transmission in the northern parts of the country operates in parallel with the Russian Unified Power System (UPS) and it is only the southern regions that depend on CAPS. In 2003, Turkmenistan disconnected the na-

⁵¹ Aziza Marat kyzy, “Gazprom prolozhit gazoprovod s severa na iug Kyrgyzstana,” *Gezitter.org*, September 2, 2014, http://www.gezitter.org/economics/32812_gazprom_prolojit_gazoprovod_s_severa_na_yug_kyrgyzstana/.

⁵² “Atambaev ob itogakh goda: izmeneniia Konstitutsii i chlenstvo v EAES,” *MIR24*, December 27, 2014, <http://mir24.tv/news/economy/11849728>.

⁵³ “Gazpromu dali eshche 4 goda na dobychu gaza v Tadjikistane,” *Radio Ozodi*, January 14, 2014, <http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/25229539.html>.

tional transmission grid from CAPS and managed to create a separate power grid.

In June 2014, Tajik state energy company Barki Tojik announced that Astana, Bishkek and Dushanbe plan to revive CAPS without the involvement of Uzbekistan.⁵⁴ For the first time the idea of connecting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's South to the joint power grid of Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan was officially announced in 2010.⁵⁵ In 2013, this idea gained additional momentum when Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia decided to create a common energy market within the EEU.⁵⁶ The initiative implies the deeper integration of national energy systems and the joint export of electricity to the power grids of other countries. In this situation, it is essential for Kazakhstan to detach itself from the unstable operation of CAPS, which provides Tashkent with a central role, and to connect Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the common energy market. Participation in this will be profitable for Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani hydroelectric power stations, which produce surplus electricity in summer. If these plans are realized, Uzbekistan's leverage deriving from its advantageous position as the dispatch center of CAPS could turn into leverage for its neighbors, who by creating an independent electricity grid would become able to control water discharge according to their own needs.

The construction of a transmission line from Khujand in Tajikistan to Datka in Kyrgyzstan is part of the U.S.-initiated CASA-1000 project.⁵⁷ Its extension to Shymkent in Kazakhstan (as a part of the Kazakh-Kyrgyz-Tajik UPS) would connect the CASA-1000 project with the EEU market. Like this, a large energy market could be formed that would limit Uzbekistan's participation and reduce the influence of the U.S. Against the backdrop of this possibility it can be understood why, in 2011, Russia radically changed its atti-

⁵⁴ "Tadzhikistan, Kazakhstan i Kyrgyzstan rassmatrivaiut vopros o vosstanovlenii edinoi energosistemy Tsentral'noi Azii," *Avesta.tj*, June 17, 2014, <http://www.avesta.tj/business/25861-tadzhikistan-kazakhstan-i-kyrgyzstan-rassmatrivayut-vopros-o-vosstanovlenii-edinoy-energosistemy-centralnoy-azii.html>.

⁵⁵ Askar Muminov, "Sviazannye odnim tokom. Astana reanimiruet OES?," *Kursiv.kz*, June 18, 2014, http://www.kursiv.kz/news/details/vlast/ svyazannye_odnim_tokom_astana_reanimiruet_oes/.

⁵⁶ Artem Borisov, "Al'ternativa, kotoroi ne bylo," *Kapital*, October 22, 2013, <http://kapital.kz/details/22436/alternativa-kotoroj-ne-bylo.html>.

⁵⁷ Sunil Kumar Khosla and John Irving, "CASA-1000: Progress and Review" (presentation at Energy Sector Coordinating Committee Meetings of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, September 10–12, 2013).

tude to CASA-1000 (from opposing the project to supporting it) and proposed \$500 million as investments to build the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan line.⁵⁸ Tashkent has been against the CASA project and believes that it is directly related to the construction of giant hydropower plants (HPP) in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁹ Being a downstream country, Uzbekistan has concerns that the power plants will create a mechanism that “will enable its owner to dictate unilaterally the harsh terms of water discharge to downstream countries,” and “this mechanism can be converted into explicit tool of political pressure.”⁶⁰

In fact, “the owner of the mechanism” to which Tashkent refers is not Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan but rather the Russian state-run companies. In 2012, the Russian and Kyrgyz governments signed agreements on building and operating Kambaratinskaya-1 and the Upper Naryn Cascade HPP. Since the Russian side finances the projects, parts of Kyrgyz shares in the joint organizations created for operational management of the projects are transferred to the Russian founder companies or the financing organizations. The Russian side is authorized to conduct strategic and operational management of the projects for the period of payback and the return of borrowed funds.⁶¹ The realization of these plans will help Russia to increase its influence in Central Asia by gaining control over the Naryn, one of the most geostrategically important cross-border rivers in the region. Similar perspectives also appear for the long-discussed Rogun HPP in the case that Tajikistan, following the positive conclusion in September 2014 of the World Bank’s final assessment report on the plant’s construction, finds itself unable to fund the project without Russia’s participation and if Moscow subsequently resumes its promises in regard to contributing to its construction.

⁵⁸ “Rossiia reshila vlozhit’ \$500 mln v energoproekt CASA-1000,” *Rosbalt*, December 18, 2013, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2013/12/18/1212762.html>.

⁵⁹ Svetlana Ponomareva, “Pochemu Uzbekistan protiv proekta CASA-1000,” *Market Leader*, March 21, 2014, <http://www.profi-forex.by/news/entry5000023918.html>.

⁶⁰ Rustam Azimov, Statement (proceedings of the High Level Meeting of Regional Riparian Issues in the Context of the “World Bank Note on Key Issues for Consideration on the Proposed Rogun Hydropower Project,” August 4, 2014).

⁶¹ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel’stvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Pravitel’stvom Kirgizskoi Respubliki o stroitel’stve i ekspluatatsii Verkhne-Narynskogo kaskada gidroelektrostantsii,” 2012, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/spd_md.nsf/0/7F9B6F8E7BAA8705C3257DB900473228 and “Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel’stvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Pravitel’stvom Kirgizskoi Respubliki o stroitel’stve i ekspluatatsii Kambaratinskoi GES-1,” 2012, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/spd_md.nsf/0/D7F6557D40148EACC3257DB9004734AD.

Russian transport infrastructure initiatives in the region are similarly aimed at by-passing Uzbekistan and thus ensuring the independence of its Central Asian allies by avoiding transit through Uzbekistani territory. Tajikistan is the most dependent country because all of its railroad lines to other countries run through Uzbekistan. The railroad connecting Uzbekistan and Tajikistan has remained inoperative since November 2011 (reportedly) due to an explosion on a railway bridge near the border of both states; as a consequence, the southern regions of Tajikistan have become cut off from the Central Asian main line. In response to these developments, Russia and its allies in the region have developed a project that can undermine the Uzbekistani role as the main railroad hub of Central Asia. In March 2013, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan signed a memorandum on the construction of a railway connecting the three countries. It is planned that the Afghan and Tajik parts of the railway will be financed under the CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation) programs. In September 2013, the Russian delegation at a meeting of Joint CAREC Transport Sector Coordinating and Customs Cooperation Committees proposed to connect the project with the Russia-Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan railroad construction plans discussed at an informal meeting of the CSTO heads of states earlier in May.⁶² The combination of the two projects would provide not only Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, but also Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan with better access to Afghanistan and, potentially, South Asia. For Tajikistan this would mean breaking the transport blockade, and it would also undermine Uzbekistan's advantageous position in the region.

The dissociation of Uzbekistan from the Eurasian integration projects and regional initiatives would lead to a significant degree of isolation of this state from the economies of the ex-Soviet republics and also sever trade relations with Russia. The government in Tashkent would lose its non-military mechanisms of influence on Bishkek and Dushanbe. It goes without saying that such a scenario is not conducive to the Uzbekistani strategic path of aspiring to being a regional leader. Tashkent thus faces a dilemma that requires performing new balancing feats on the "strategic wire" in order to prevent

⁶² Zarina Ergasheva, "Russia offers construction of railway to Tajikistan via Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Asia-Plus*, October 3, 2013, <http://news.tj/en/news/russia-offers-construction-railway-tajikistan-kazakhstan-and-kyrgyzstan>; "Uchastniki sammita ODKB obsudili proekt zheleznoi dorogi Rossiia-Kazakhstan-Kyrgystan-Tadzhikistan," *ITAR-TASS*, May 28, 2013, <http://itar-tass.com/glavnie-novosti/582254>.

negative developments and to remain an independent leader of Central Asia. Concerns over its increasingly difficult position perhaps were in the background when the Acting Head of Freight and Commercial Operation of Uzbekistan Railroads, Utkur Astanov, in July 2014 announced that the Uzbekistani side had decided to launch Tajikistan's transit transportation on a new line.⁶³ Easing relations with neighbors is also essential for maintaining stability at the borders in the situation of Afghanistan's uncertain future and changing geopolitical conjunctures.

Conclusion: The Risks Involved in Uzbekistan's Game of Chance

The long-term goal of achieving "eternal independence" declared by Uzbekistan is an important element of the project of nationalizing state identity. This makes the foreign policy of Tashkent different from the policies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In those countries, the well-established set of security, political and economic links with Moscow significantly limits the maneuvering room in relations with other countries. Striving to be as independent as possible in its foreign policy, Uzbekistan performs a balancing act in its relationships with international actors. Proceeding from the interpretations of the changing external and internal dynamics, this act entails a simultaneous reduction and enhancement of one direction or the other. Any radical changes in the regional and domestic security environment have an impact as "shock points" or "explosions" that send out waves leading to the oscillation of the "wire" upon which Uzbekistani strategic goals are strung. In tune with such oscillations, the country's foreign policy inclines in those directions and can thus provide immediate support for state security. However, when the explosive wave calms and the security environment stabilizes, and the "wire" settles into a state of gradual motion, Uzbekistani policy subsequently returns to its strategic balancing act. Eventually, in Uzbekistan's game of chance, maintaining a balance depends on how successfully the opportunities and risks inherent in the changing environment are met.

⁶³ Dar'ia Beloglazova, "Zhdut reaktsii kolleg," *Gudok*, July 30, 2014, 5.

By pursuing its desire to be an independent Central Asian leader, Tashkent plays a risky game that affects developments in the region. Since this policy is based on contraposition rather than complementing the external directions, the Uzbekistani gamble is fraught with increasing confrontation between the country's foreign partners, who try to anchor their presence and influence in Central Asia by counterbalancing the policies of each other and design their regional strategies correspondingly. Because external and internal developments are connected to each other, this political environment also threatens the domestic situation in Uzbekistan. The radicalization of the opposition and the problematic areas in the Ferghana Valley, Karakalpakstan and the Tajik-populated territories, in addition to the uncertainty related to the upcoming transfer of presidential power, can foster the fragmentation of state organization. If the political elite in Tashkent loses its grip on domestic affairs, the risk of major internal crises will increase. In this situation, both the states engaged in the region's politics as well as transborder groups of insurgents will try to gain a stake in the redistribution of political power in Uzbekistan for their own benefit, which again will accelerate confrontation between the foreign actors.

Any instability arising in the Central Asian states can undermine Russia's influence in the region and prompt its proactive foreign policy measures in the security sphere, including the use of military force in accordance with the commitments in the framework of the CSTO and bilateral agreements. To secure its regional presence Moscow tries to engage Tashkent in the Eurasian integration processes, but such efforts have thus far not been successful. For this reason the integration projects have been redirected to make a detour around Uzbekistan. Currently, the intensification of Russian political, economic and military ties with the Central Asian CSTO members and the simultaneous dissociation of Uzbekistan from regional economic arrangements are the points of departure for Moscow's policy toward Tashkent, which aims to persuade the Uzbekistani government to participate in Eurasian integration. However, the leadership in Tashkent perceives close engagement with the emerging Eurasian Union as a threat to national independence and its right to rule the state.

As the country's participation in the CSTO shows, Uzbekistan with its high level of vertical integration is incapable of making compromises in multilateral frames of cooperation. In the Central Asian states any initiative for the delegation of authority to supra-national institutions encounters uncom-

promising perceptions of sovereignty. Additionally, mutual distrust between these states amplifies contrasting opinions over security-related issues. Security is strongly associated with the survival of personified regimes in these countries, and a collectivistic approach has little chance of developing due to divergent views on common threats. Political organization in Uzbekistan, which is centered upon the leader, President Karimov, makes it difficult for Tashkent to accept a multilateral regional institution led by another and more powerful state. By contrast, the Uzbekistani leadership feels more comfortable in bilateral contacts: in such cases there is no need to coordinate political agenda with a number of different actors and no risk of finding one's own position marginalized by a group of associated states with concordant opinions. Moreover, bilateral relations provide the possibility of informal arrangements that suit Uzbekistan's balancing act amidst extra-regional powers. In bilateral cooperation, Tashkent is able to demand "equal rights" treatment from powerful foreign partners. At the same time bilateral agreements are easier to break than those adopted in multilateral formats.

The policy choices made by Russia, which are aimed at depriving Uzbekistan of its tools of influence over its neighbors, affect the present structure of state borders in Central Asia. Russian initiatives for regional energy and transport projects that by-pass Uzbekistan, and its plans for military supplies to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, strengthen the relative positions of Bishkek and Dushanbe in border disputes with Tashkent. The implementation of these initiatives can also reshape the Central Asian borderlands in those areas through which the routes of Uzbekistan's economic interaction with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan traditionally run. The aggravation of Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors perhaps can be alleviated by means of the joint efforts of extra-regional actors focused on regional development and linked with such initiatives as the "New Silk Roads" proposed by the U.S. and China, as well as the projects within Eurasian integration promoted by Russia and Kazakhstan.

Since independence the Uzbekistani leadership has attempted to rely on its own sources of power for resolving domestic problems, while the protection of the Afghan border, both official and "secondary," has required support from international actors. The reorganization of the foreign military presence and the change of power in Afghanistan drives the government of Uzbekistan to active negotiations regarding security guarantees with its foreign partners. In this process, two security systems are in competition with

each other: the Russian-led CSTO and the U.S.-led NATO. In the field of security, the EU does not have much to offer Uzbekistan separately from the U.S. and NATO, and its emphasis on good governance, human rights and, more generally, democratization is counterproductive to building relations with the independent-minded ruling elite in Tashkent. The structure of security guarantees provided by Washington is flexible because it is based mostly on rather vague political declarations. The security interaction between Moscow and Tashkent has a solid foundation with legally binding security guarantees that are enshrined in numerous agreements on military cooperation between the two states, and above all, in the Treaty of Alliance.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Uzbekistan favors a more pro-Russian direction that would eventually mean drawing the country into the deeper political integration within the developing Eurasian association. To avoid this scenario Tashkent has shifted from the format of collective security cooperation to a bilateral alliance with Russia. The Uzbek “task of the day” is to bargain for such security guarantees which involve minimum interference of an external authority in decision-making concerning issues within the political boundaries of the country; boundaries relating to both domestic politics and interaction with international actors. The balancing act of Uzbekistan implies the diversification of foreign policy directions in order to ensure security on its path towards “eternal independence.” However, this game of chance also entails the continuous risk that the path could result in a loss of the positions that this state aspires to in regional political and economic affairs; and this risk is growing due to the increasingly tense relations between the rival security arrangements of Russia and the U.S. in the region.